

What is the relationship between drug abuse and mental illness?

Many chronic drug abusers—the individuals we commonly regard as addicts—often simultaneously suffer from a serious mental disorder. Drug treatment and medical professionals call this condition a co-occurring disorder or a dual diagnosis.

What is chronic drug abuse?

Chronic drug abuse is the habitual abuse of licit or illicit drugs to the extent that the abuse substantially injures a person's health or substantially interferes with his or her social or economic functioning. Furthermore, any person who has lost the power of self-control over the use of drugs is considered a chronic drug abuser.

What are some serious mental disorders associated with chronic drug abuse?

Chronic drug abuse may occur in conjunction with any mental illness identified in the American Psychiatric Association *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV* (DSM-IV). Some common serious mental disorders associated with chronic drug abuse include schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, manic depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, panic disorder, and antisocial personality disorder. Some of these disorders carry with them an increased risk of drug abuse (see text box).

How prevalent are co-occurring disorders?

Co-occurring disorders are very common. In 2002 an estimated 4.0 million adults met the criteria for both serious mental illness and substance dependence or abuse in the past year.

Which occurs first—chronic drug abuse or serious mental illness?

It depends. In some cases, people suffering from serious mental disorders (often undiagnosed ones) take drugs to alleviate their symptoms—a practice known as self-medicating. According to the American Psychiatric Association, individuals with schizophrenia sometimes use substances such as marijuana to mitigate the disorder's negative symptoms (depression, apathy, and social withdrawal), to combat auditory hallucinations and paranoid delusions, or to lessen the adverse effects of their medication, which can include depression and restlessness.

In other cases mental disorders are caused by drug abuse. For example, MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, commonly known as ecstasy), produces long-term deficits in serotonin function in the brain, leading to mental disorders such as depression and anxiety. Chronic drug abuse by adolescents during formative years is a particular concern because it can interfere with normal socialization and cognitive development and thus frequently contributes to the development of mental disorders.

Finally, chronic substance abuse and serious mental disorders may exist completely independently of one another.

Disorders With Increased Risk of Drug Abuse

Disorder	Risk
Antisocial personality disorder	15.5%
Manic episode	14.5%
Schizophrenia	10.1%
Panic disorder	4.3%
Major depressive episode	4.1%
Obsessive-compulsive disorder	3.4%
Phobias	2.1%

Source: National Institute of Mental Health.

Can people with co-occurring disorders be treated effectively?

Yes, chronic drug abusers who also suffer from mental illness can be treated. Researchers currently are investigating the most effective way to treat drug abusers with mental illness, and especially whether or not treating both conditions simultaneously leads to better recovery. Currently, the two conditions often are treated separately or without regard to each other. As a result, many individuals with co-occurring disorders are sent back and forth between substance abuse and mental health treatment settings.



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